DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 553 EC 307 732

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TITLE Boxed In: An Explanation for the Growth of Special Education.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Achievement Tests; *Disabilities; Disability Identification; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *Incidence; Individual Differences; Intervention; Models; Research and Development; Research Needs; *Special Education; Standardized Tests; Student Needs; *Theory Practice Relationship; Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

Noting that the number of students served in special education programs has increased at alarming rates since 1975, this paper posits that this increase is due to recent social and political variables and their impact on the educational system. Special emphasis is placed on how state and local educational leaders respond to national education movements. The paper argues that the academic excellence movement has led to an emphasis on standardized achievement tests and a deficit perspective towards children, in which children who vary from the standard are perceived as needing "fixing," usually by special education programs and interventions. Educators are seen as "boxed in" by the emphasis on achievement test performance and unable to teach to individual student needs and interests. The paper urges educators to develop a new vision of educational intervention based on a wellness rather than deficit paradigm and a focus on strengths rather than deficits of children and families. Researchers are encouraged to bridge the gap between research and practice, and specific research needs are identified. (Contains 29 references.) (DB)

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Boxed In: An explanation for the growth of special education

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Abstract

The number of students served in special education programs has increased at alarming rates since Congress enacted the 1975 federal special education law (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1999). For example, in the 1976-77 school year, nearly 3.5 million students received special education services; in 1990-1991, just over 4.8 million received those services (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). The vast grow of special education has resulted in an increase of expenditures from 5 billion in 1977 to 32 billion in 1995 (Terman, Larner, Stevenson, & Behrman, 1996).

Many explanations have been suggested for the growth of special education. Some of those reasons include an increased awareness of disabling conditions, political pressure applied by advocacy groups, and technology. This paper provides an alternative explanation for the growth of special education. Emphasis is placed on recent social and political variables and their impact on the educational system. Special emphasis is placed on how state and local educational leaders respond to national education movements. Recommendations are provided to facilitate positive growth for all youth.

The number of students served in special education programs has increased at alarming rates since congress enacted the 1975 federal special education law (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1999). For example, in the 1976-77 school year, nearly 3.5 million students received special education services; in 1990-1991, just over 4.8 million received those services (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Table 1 indicates the growth in the number of students in public school special education programs compared to the total public school population. Turnbull et al. (1999) also indicated that different sub-categories of special education have grown at astonishing rates. For example, between 1976-77 and 1990-91, the number of students with learning disabilities escalated 170 percent from approximately 783,000 to 2,117,087. Students with learning disabilities currently represent 3.75 percent of all students aged six to twenty-one or one student in every class of twenty-seven students (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

More than one in ten children in America now qualify for special education. About three-fourths of these students fall into two categories: specific learning disabilities and speech language impairments (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1999) The vast growth in the number of students identified as disabled has caused special education to be one of the most emotional issues in educational politics. It divides families, challenges educators, and perplexes bureaucrats and the legal system. Many rationales have been suggested for this growth in special education. Some of those include an increased awareness of disabling conditions, political pressure applied by advocacy groups, and medical technology. It appears that further study needs to be conducted to uncover why special education continues to grow at amazing rates. The purpose of this paper is to explore an alternative explanation for the growth of special education.

The Beginning of our Formal Culture of Disability

T. H. Bell's 1981 National Commission on Excellence in Education was the beginning of our formal culture of disability. The Commission was created as a result of the widespread public perception that something was seriously wrong in the educational system. Bell's Commission conducted a variety of studies to (1) assess the quality of teaching and learning in the Nation's public and private schools, colleges, and universities; (2) compare American schools and colleges with those of other advanced nations; (3) determine the relationship between college admissions requirements and student achievement in high school; (4) identify educational programs that result in notable student success in college; (5) assess the degree to which major social and educational changes in the last quarter century have affected student achievement; and (6) define problems which must be faced and overcome in the United States in order to pursue the course of excellence in education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The research findings of the National Commission of Excellence in Education were reported in *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983). A sample of their discoveries included that:

- Some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.
- About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent.
- Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is lower than 26 years ago.
- Many 17-year-olds cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay; and only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps.
- There was a steady decline in science achievement scores among 17-year-olds.

- International comparisons of student achievement, completed a decade ago, reveal that on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times.
- Over half of the gifted population underachieve in school
- The College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980. Average verbal scores fell over 50 points and average mathematics scores dropped nearly 40 points.
- Between 1975 and 1980, remedial mathematics courses in public 4-year colleges increased by 72 percent and now constitute one-quarter of all mathematics courses taught in those institutions.

These startling findings led the National Commission on Academic Excellence in Education (1983) to conclude that the well-being of the American people was at risk due to the erosion of the educational foundations of society and the rising tide of mediocrity found in institutions throughout the United States. This risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently; it is not just that the South Koreans recently built the world's most efficient steel mill, or that American machine tools, once the pride of the world, are being displaced by German products. These developments also signify a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). To counter these negative trends, policymakers created the academic excellence movement in education.

Proponents of the academic excellence movement theorize that at the heart of any society is the commitment to a system of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood. Such a society has as a basic foundation the idea that education is important not only because of what it contributes to one's career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of one's life. These individuals also advocate for state and local educational leaders to use the results of standardized tests to gauge the progress and evaluate the success of educational systems.

State and Local Responses to the Academic Excellence Movement

State educational leaders have used the academic excellence movement to design policies that evaluate local school districts based on the results of achievement tests. For example, Alabama legislators passed a school accountability law that requires school districts which score the lowest on the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) to be placed in one of four categories: caution, alert 1, alert 2, or alert 3 (Reeves, 1998). In extreme cases, the state department of education will take control of local school districts that are not adequately progressing. The department will immediately remove principals, handle finances, and place teachers under close supervision (Reeves, 1998). State and local media are also used to illuminate school districts which are perceived as successful and those which are having limited success. For instance each summer, local newspapers write comprehensive stories using standardized achievement test results to compare the success of individual schools and local school districts (See Smith, 1998).

Test results often determine whether principals keep their jobs, teachers get raises and even whether some schools are allowed to stay open (Greene, 1998). This heavy emphasis on standardized testing routinely causes educators to feel **"boxed in"** as they must conform to the current testing movement (See Figure 1). This uncomfortable feeling has brought about changes in the way education leaders view curriculum and instruction. Curriculum components clearly are driven by skills that are measured on standardized achievement tests such as, the SAT (See Madaus, 1989). For example, it is not uncommon for school administrators to say that more time needs to be spent on discrete skill development rather than engaging students in integrated thematic units of study. Frequently, recess and the arts have been eliminated in order to spend more time on isolated skills (Johnston, 1998). Regrettably, generations of students are not being exposed to the arts nor do they gain from the socio-emotional benefits of play.

The use of standardized tests has effected how youth are educated today. For example, it is common to observe young children (ages three to eight) spending many hours participating in abstract developmentally inappropriate activities (See National Association for the Education of Young Children Guidelines, 1996). Regardless of the age of the student, it appears that they are expected to work silently and alone on worksheets or other seat work. This paper and pencil instructional strategy also routinely results in students spending many hours memorizing isolated facts that have no relevance to their everyday life. Unfortunately, many youth today simply perceive school as a series of tasks that need to be completed in order to advance to the next grade level; the joy of learning is absent for many students. Inappropriate instructional strategies are only one reason youth are disinterested in school.

Many students view educators as adversarial power brokers who are insensitive to their diverse needs. This perception coupled with a disinterest in curriculum routinely causes students to exhibit behavior patterns that disrupt the classroom ecology. These inappropriate behaviors result in thousands of children each day being suspended from America's schools. In other instances, school districts create policies to "push out" students who are underachieving academically. For example in some metropolitan school districts, students are suspended for the entire school year once they are absent twenty-five days. By "pushing out" these students, standardized achievement test results obviously increase. Yet another exclusionary approach is to place students on homebound instruction due to aberrant behavior patterns. Consequently, this sense of being **"boxed in"** by achievement test scores, results in educators designing and implementing educational activities that are insensitive to the developmental needs of many students. This insensitivity to student needs frequently causes educators to explain low test scores

by expressing their concerns about students who are tardy, absent, disruptive, and disrespectful (Myrick, 1993).

A Deficit Perspective and Professional Opportunism

An emphasis on achievement test results has caused many educators to develop a deficit perspective towards children. Youth who routinely disrupt the classroom or who score low on achievement tests are perceived as having personal deficits that create individual and school problems. McDermott and Varenne (1995) indicated that a deficit (disability) perspective has become a potent cultural fact for most American lives. They suggested that for the past thirty years, the anthropology of education has been dominated by the question of how to talk with rigor and respect about children who fail in school. Two general modes of response are evident. The first answers the question of what is wrong with their lives by focusing on what is wrong with them: the children and often their families. Much in the name of helping, these answers specify that something is in fact wrong inside the children, something wrong in their cognitive, linguistic, and social development. The second response answers the question of what is wrong with their lives by focusing on what others do to make them so seemingly miserable and unproductive. Rather than focusing on what is wrong inside the child, the second effort focuses on what is wrong outside the child in the world we give them.

Regrettably, the heavy emphasis placed on standardized achievement test results has reinforced the cultural deficit perspective towards children. Children struggling in school routinely are perceived as needing "fixing" in order for them to be successful. This "fix it" educational perspective occurred at a time (1980's) when a new educational field was formally beginning to develop; that field was special education. Special education professionals seized the deficit perspective towards children as an opportunity to establish their discipline. Initially, they

attempted to define and label certain sub-populations who were perceived as needing "fixing." Many books and journal articles discussed definitions and the characteristics associated with each group of school-aged students (See Coleman, 1996; Henley, Ramsey & Algozzine, 1993; Lerner, 1993; and Mercer, 1997).

The deficit perspective towards children has resulted in a variety of special education classifications. These typologies provide parents with a sense of understanding and a general level of comfort to explain why their child is different from other children. For instance it is common to hear parents state to others, "that you know my child is LD don't you?" Categorizing youth also allows educators to study and develop best practices for given sub-populations of children such as, students with learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and mental retardation. The vast growth of special education has resulted in increasing expenditures for students with disabling conditions. In 1977 the national cost of special education services was roughly five billion dollars. Currently that cost has soared to $32 billion (Terman, Larner, Stevenson, & Behrman, 1996). In total, more than $280 billion has been spent by state, local and the federal government since the inception of special education (Robinson, 1996).

Despite these large expenditures, students with disabilities are exiting school without the necessary skills to function successfully in their local community (Harris & Associates, 1994; Hasazi, Hock, & Cravedi-Cheng, 1992; Hughes, Eisenman, Bogseon, Kim, Killian, & Scott, 1997; Wagner, 1995). For instance, the United States Department of Education released a recent report to Congress that found that within 3 to 5 years after high school, only 20% of students with disabilities were functioning independently in living arrangements, social relationships, and employment (Psy-Ed. Corp, 1994). The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) also found disappointing results as only 57% of individuals with disabilities were employed three to

five years after graduation from high school (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). These negative findings make it painfully obvious that educators must re-examine the growth and success of special education programs.

It appears that many young people in our nation's schools feel they have little control in their lives. These perceptions provide a possible reason for the increasing numbers of young people experiencing anorexia nervosa, teenage pregnancy, committing crimes, and exiting school early. For example, teenagers account for the largest portion of all violent crime in America, and individuals between seventeen and nineteen are the most violent of all age groups (U. S. Department of Justice, 1995). It is painfully obvious that socializing agents such as parents, churches, and schools, must answer the question, "Why are children struggling?" Through collaborative initiatives, educators must answer this important question by focusing on the establishment of mutually respectful relationships among institutions and individuals that directly impact the wellness of our youth. This comprehensive response may provide a way to explore and possibly avert future tragedies such as those that have occurred in Mississippi, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Oregon.

Conclusion

The academic excellence movement's heavy reliance on standardized achievement test results has caused many educators to feel **"boxed in"**. As a result, educators have been forced to create curriculum and instructional strategies that are insensitive to individual student needs and interests, and developmental milestones. This inappropriate instructional focus on isolated skills frequently causes students to exhibit unacceptable behavior, underachieve, and ultimately be labeled by educators as having personal deficits that hinder their school and community success. While this deficit perspective towards children explains the increased number of students in

special education programs, it is evident that it does not enhance the personal wellness of all children.

Recommendations

A deficit perspective towards children can not continue. Our society simply does not have the economic resources to support the continued growth of special education. A new vision of educational interventions is needed to promote the growth of all of America's children. This vision should reflect a deeper appreciation for the whole child based upon a wellness paradigm, rather that a deficit perspective rooted in a disease-based model (See Armstrong, 1998). This new theoretical perspective would allow institutions and individuals to focus on the overall strengths rather than the deficits of children and families. Members of the educational research community are urged to conduct studies on the positive qualities of children and what their abilities could mean in contributing to their success in the classroom and in life. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1983) is one possible framework for developing assessment instruments to help identify the abilities of children.

Educators need to re-examine how educational policies are developed. Berliner and Biddle (1995) suggest that any attempts to improve education are more likely to succeed if they are associated with research suggesting that they actually work. For example, suppose a community, state, or nation was thinking about building a super highway, sending dogs to the moon, or authorizing an expensive program to control a disease. In each case, we would want to base our decision about the issue on research, on relevant theories and evidence that investigators had compiled concerning our decision. Moreover, in many cases we would demand to see the results of that research before we made our decision, and if the research had not yet been conducted, we would commission that research as a necessary step before we took action.

Additional scholarly attention is needed to bridge the gap between research and practice. Special emphasis should be placed on current research data that answers the following eight questions: (1) What impact does certain demographic information (i.e. poverty, region of the country, single parents, etc.) have on academic achievement? (2) How does school or class size impact learning? (3) Are developmental milestones used in educational planning? (4) Are multiple instructional strategies incorporated into the curriculum? (5) Is student assessment authentic and ongoing? (6) Is there frequent ongoing communication with parents and other community stakeholders? (7) Is there a level of mutual respect between professionals and their clientele? (8) Does higher education provide a framework to facilitate optimal educational experiences for children? A review of relevant research coupled with long-range planning will bridge the gap between research and practice and will guide political leaders and educators as they reconceptualize how they view educational performance.

A broader more comprehensive perspective towards children is needed to gauge how America's youth are functioning. Evaluation measures should take into account the whole child. For example, individual performance should not be limited to cognitive development but should also include socio-emotional, and psycho-motor development. Local education agencies should choose norm-referenced tests and design criterion-referenced measures to determine how their children are performing. These criterion-referenced evaluative measures should be based on information gathered from a variety of stakeholders such as, students, parents, and local community members. A greater dependence on authentic assessment and less reliance on standardized tests will enable educators to feel that they are empowered to design educational activities that occur in their own unique classroom settings. In essence, we have **"unboxed"** educators to address the needs of all students.

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Percentage of Public School Students with Disabilities in the United States

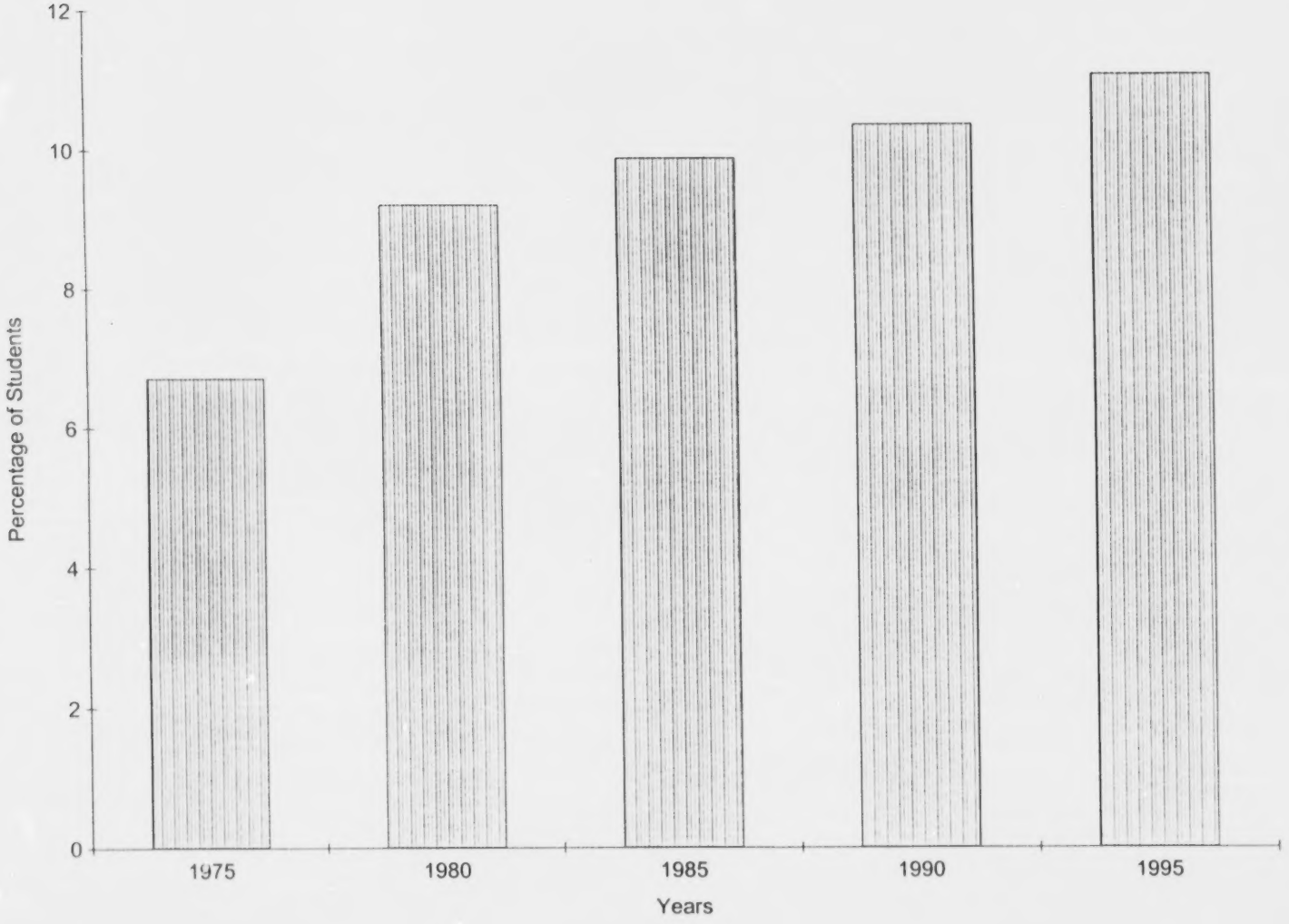
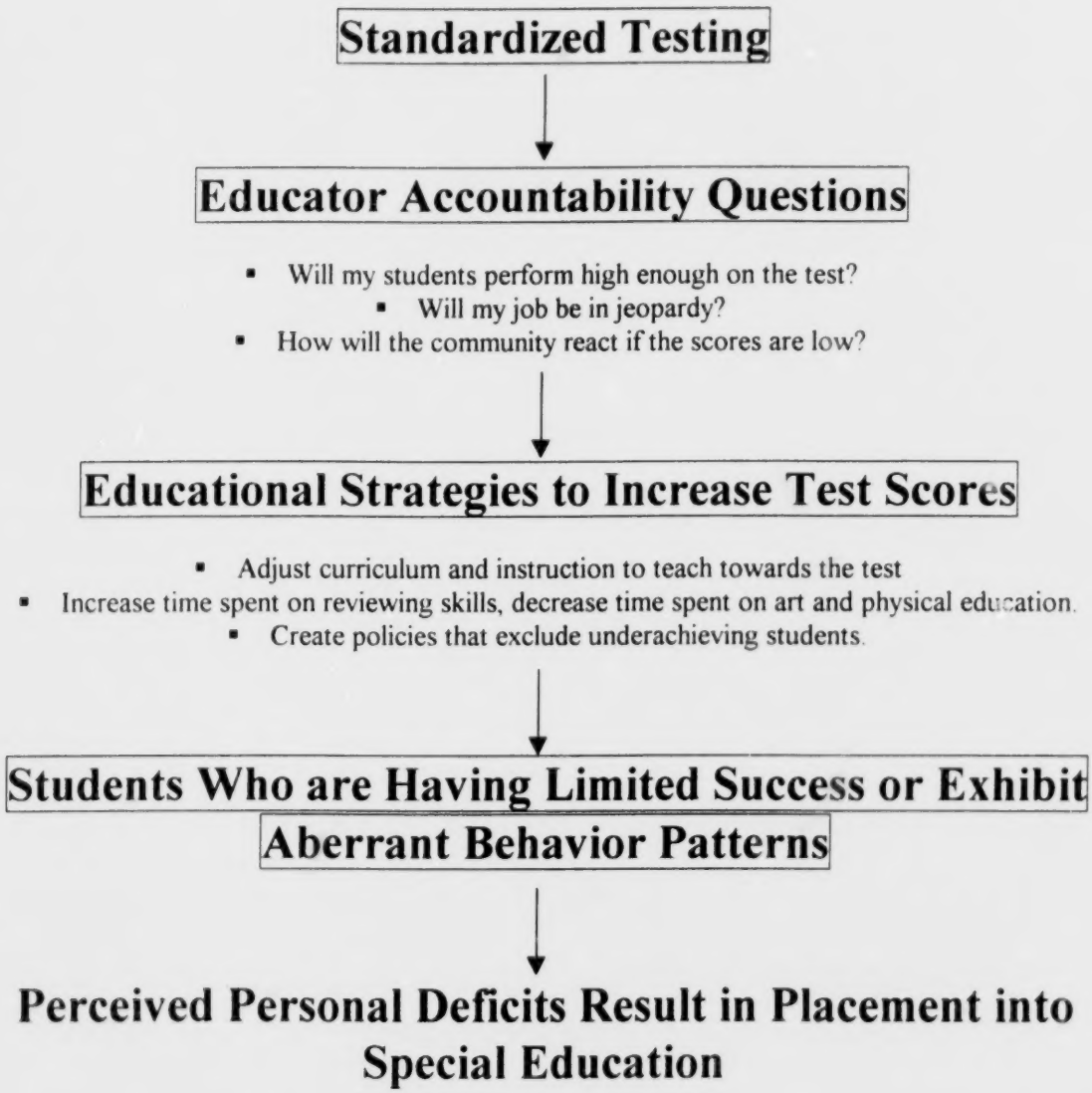


Figure 1 The Pathway to the Growth of Special Education


Standardized Testing
Educator Accountability Questions
Will my students perform high enough on the test?
Will my job be in jeopardy?
How will the community react if the scores are low?
Educational Strategies to Increase Test Scores
Adjust curriculum and instruction to teach towards the test
Increase time spent on reviewing skills, decrease time spent on art and physical education.
Create policies that exclude underachieving students.
Students Who are Having Limited Success or Exhibit Aberrant Behavior Patterns
Perceived Personal Deficits Result in Placement into Special Education